Ascending the Shadows of my Past: A Collection of Female Led Fantasy Novels

Sammy Schwindt

University of Puget Sound

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Before I could even hold a book, my mother read to me a plethora of literature, beginning with bedtime stories, and eventually progressing to poetry. She had always encouraged me to read, taking me to our local library to spend hours immersed between the shelves, soaking in the smell and atmosphere of a place solely devoted to ink on paper. During the summers, I would leave with a stack of books bordering on excessive, even to the librarians. While my siblings played outside, my head was buried in whichever novel I was reading at the time, so invested in the adventure of the characters that I couldn’t tear myself away. Although reading was and always will be my favorite source of leisure, it was not for pure enjoyment that I spent so much of my childhood in a written world. As a product of divorce, I was designated to spend every other weekend with my father, a narcissistic man with an untreated anxiety disorder. To cope with his mental illness, he drowned himself in alcohol, hoping to push away all emotion and finally fall asleep. However, his addiction began to infiltrate our relationship, causing verbal arguments that ended in the screaming and crying of a child that had no way out. As the only daughter of a cruel man, I was the sole victim of his narcissism and addiction. My mother and stepfather tried their best to shield me from his emotional abuse, but there was only so much they could do. In the troubled times of my youth, I turned to fantasy novels as my only solace.

Despite having read many fiction and nonfiction books, I still remember the first piece of fantasy literature I picked off the shelves. I was wandering through my middle school library when a dark covered book entitled *hush, hush* (Fitzpatrick, 2009) grabbed my attention. Within a few hours, I was encapsulated by the story of a young woman discovering the truth of her father’s death in a mysterious world of angels and demons. From this point forward, I was constantly searching for novels that contained a world different than my own, filled with seemingly ordinary female characters that overcame impossible odds. I would check out an entire series from the library, usually receiving a satisfied smirk from the librarians, to keep me occupied through weekends with my father. No matter how suffocating the time with him became, I would always be able to escape into a magical place where all things are possible. In time, I began to incorporate classical music into my reading, joining the symphonies and sentences until they were inseparable. The music enhanced emotions elicited from the fantastical story while also blocking out the noise and chaos of my own reality. Despite my father’s praise in front of our extended family, my love for books was another source of conflict behind closed doors. Ranting of how my reading was taking my attention away from him, he failed to consider
the reason behind my need to escape. I eventually began to buy my own copies of these novels, so that I could reread them from time to time or whenever I needed a moment alone. Some of these series can still be found in my collection, including but not limited to *hush, hush* (Fitzpatrick, 2009) and *Beautiful Creatures* (Garcia & Stohl, 2009).

Looking back upon the start of my fantasy novel collection, I can begin to identify themes that spoke to my child self and many other young women. As a genre, fantasy is often characterized by magical elements that exist in a fictitious world created by the author. Depending on the novel, supernatural races such as faeries, vampires, and angels may be present. The magical abilities and biology of these races are based upon folklore and mythology, creating a fantastical world of immense depth and history. The captivating beauty of the setting and characters was one of the first themes that drew me in, allowing me to access a plane of existence full of freedom so unlike my own. For instance, the *Throne of Glass* (Maas, 2012) series contains seven books in which the main characters travel throughout an expansive continent, experiencing vast magical wilderness and carefully crafted cities. My younger self was enraptured with the possibility of seeing a whole world outside of Colorado or even my hometown, giving me hope that there was more to life than what was in front of me now.

Additionally, the focus of many fantasy novels emphasizes the journey of a protagonist faced with an upheaval of the world they know, throwing them into a conflict that can only be resolved by them. Such hardships may include an impending war, solving the murder of a loved one, or overthrowing an oppressive authority. I gravitate towards stories wherein the female lead comes from humble beginnings, overcoming impossible odds to break free of an oppressive state and finding herself through the help of others. While living with my father, this plot resembled my own reality, whereas the characters had the power to rebel, I could only go so far. For example, the *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (Maas, 2015) series features a character by the name of Feyre. In the beginning of the story, Feyre is a human forced with the responsibility of keeping her impoverished family alive. She has no way out of this miserable existence, but after killing a faerie in the form of a wolf, her life as she knows it changes. Throughout the next four novels, Feyre faces trials of love and violence, transforming into a magically and spiritually powerful woman that fights to end the rule of a murderous king. I felt empowered by Feyre’s journey and hoped that one day I would have the courage to do the same. Although the primary
conflict varies amongst each novel, the central theme of my collection remains the same: the strength you seek lies within, if only you dare to find it.

Once I reached high school, life became busier and classes became more difficult, leading me to take a brief hiatus from reading. At this point I had gotten my driver’s license and was able to limit visits with my father to a minimum, allowing me to glance up from the page and look around. College crept closer and I could no longer ignore the pressing issue of taking my life into my own hands. I was face to face with a murky future, blindly grasping at air. My father urged me to remain in Colorado for the sake of keeping a close eye on me, but I opted to move across the country to attend the University of Puget Sound. With the support of my mother and stepfather, I cut contact with him entirely and began a new life in an unfamiliar place. Being on my own without the pressures of an abusive relationship reignited my love for books. Instead of strictly reading young adult fantasy, I took an interest in adult fantasy where the characters started to resemble my own level of maturity. These novels make up the majority of my collection, but still follow many of the same themes as the first books I bought. Some of my favorites include those written by Sarah J. Maas such as *The Throne of Glass* (Maas, 2012), *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (2015), and *Crescent City* (2021). Consequently, I started to connect with these novels in a new way. My younger self only related to the first portion of the story, where the protagonist was trapped mentally or physically, but my newfound freedom enabled me to view them from a different perspective.

Although it was terrifying to be liberated from a life I had lived for so long, it was the best decision I’ve ever made. The more adult fantasy I read, the more I started to be empowered by the characters in my novels and their journeys. It was no longer a method of escape, but a force that drove me forward to achieve more than I could have ever dreamed of. If the women in these stories could overcome unimaginable hardships and achieve a sense of happiness in the process, then so could I. As I mentioned previously, my mother was the first person to spark my passion for reading, but more than that, she was my biggest supporter and role model. I realize now that several of the female characters in my novels embody her qualities such as courage, strength, and empathy. At this point in my life, I started to see those qualities within myself, but it was not always easy to maintain that sense of grit. Whenever I thought I could no longer endure the lasting impact of my father’s abuse, she was there to keep pushing me, reminding me
that I would always have a choice: to let it consume me or let it liberate me. Just as she encouraged me, the women in my novels had the same effect.

For instance, my favorite series in this collection, *Crescent City* (Maas, 2021), embodies many of the emotions I felt throughout my college experience. The main character, Bryce, is tasked with solving the murder of her best friend, Danika, while battling trauma caused by her bitter father. Throughout the novel, Bryce is forced to process her lasting guilt from not preventing Danika’s death while also mourning her friend. As I read, I connected with Bryce more and more. She had an abusive father whom she had no contact with and a mother and stepfather that loved her throughout all the adversity she endured. Bryce did not let the brutality of others keep her from achieving her goals, but rather learned to accept help from people that truly cared. I found this to be inspiring, as it was hard to let anyone in or lean upon them when I really needed it. I wanted to be like her, to live life to the fullest no matter the trauma she had endured or the people that told her to give up. A favorite mantra of Danika, “Through love, all is possible”, can be found highlighted multiple times in my copy of *Crescent City* (Maas, 2021). When my life gets difficult and I feel like I may not have the strength to move forward, I think back upon this phrase. I remind myself that the love and encouragement of my friends and family allows me to achieve anything I wish, so long as I’m willing to try.

Before writing this essay, I had never considered how my collection first began, but after reflecting on my past, I see that it originated from a place of pain. My attachment towards fantasy novels started as a form of escapism, but transformed into a catalyst, giving me the courage to find myself and heal from my father’s abuse. This collection is very dear to my heart with many of my novels having been reread multiple times, often scribbled with notes, and highlighted phrases. I hope that as you read through the journey of my life and the significance of literature within it, you may be inspired to read a few of these novels. I am still working on myself, but with the help of my books, friends, and family I will continue to press on. I wouldn’t change any of it, even if it meant preventing heartbreak, because the greatest strength comes from our darkest times. For that reason, I am lucky and proud to say that I have found my own happiness, but it may not have been possible without the fictional characters that led me here.
Annotated Bibliography

   ❖ As I mentioned in my essay, I started reading with renewed ferocity once I entered college; this was the series that brought me back into fantasy novels. The main character Alina is an example of a theme within the fantasy genre: a secret power revealed in a seemingly ordinary character. Many female protagonists in my collection exemplify strength not only in character but in magical abilities, giving a physical quality to their resilient personality.

   ❖ The last book in the Shadow and Bone series, Alina has gathered a loyal group of friends to end the reign of her former mentor and friend. Although the focus of my collection is surrounding female protagonists, the allies that they gather along the way serve as an important reminder that we can’t accomplish anything alone.

   ❖ In the second novel of this series, Alina has experienced betrayal from another main character that she put her faith in, turning the story in a completely different direction. In parallel to reality, people are not always as they seem, allowing for the growth of Alina’s character and a takeaway lesson for the reader.

   ❖ The characters in my collection have usually experienced something traumatic or are currently experiencing adversity. Jude Duarte is a human in a land of faeries where she is prejudiced for being different, but in a show of pure adamant, she tries to rise above and claim her spot in their court. Her cunning skill and resilience are examples of grit represented by the women in my collected fantasy novels.

   ❖ Throughout the series, Jude saw power as her ultimate goal, but after losing the man she loves, Jude sees what is truly important: loyalty. This term rings true for this collection; female heroines including Jude fight for what is moral and just, their loyalty devoted to protecting the innocent.

In this book, Jude begins to develop an understanding of a man once thought to be her enemy while forced to work together and regain order in their kingdom. A few of my novels have an element of romance, but the significance here lies within the similarities between what are seemingly drastically different characters. Their relationship builds Jude’s character while also broadening her perspective, leading to trust that was previously absent.


- A central plot point is revealed in this book, as Nora, the main character, starts to connect her father’s death to the world of angels and demons. However, her fallen angel boyfriend is unable to help her due to restriction by archangels. This sense of loneliness takes place in the plot of most fantasy novels, creating a central turning point where the heroine takes matters into her own hands.


- This book introduced my first experience with death in literature. Although it is never enjoyable to experience an important character meeting their end, it depicts an important lesson in loss. In this case and in many others, the death of a main character symbolizes sacrifice, distinctly for a cause worth dying for.


- As I detailed in my essay, this was the first fantasy novel I’ve ever read, and it remains one of my favorites to this day. The plot of this story is shrouded in mystery, with layer after layer of truth being revealed the more you read. Additionally, the placement of magic in a modern setting is unique to my collection, as most other novels take place in a wholly fictional world.


- Although Nora had displayed emotional and mental fortitude in the past two novels, she undergoes a physical transformation into a magical being. The theme of a transformation is central to many books in my collection, especially for characters that begin as entirely human.


- The romance and mystery of this series is emphasized in this book, where Lena and Ethan develop the special ability to speak to one another telepathically. However,
their relationship is actively being tested due to a centuries old curse and Lena’s evil mother. This period of hardship happens often in my collected books and while it is difficult to get through at times, it usually creates a stronger bond between the characters.

   ❖ Although this series is from the perspective of Ethan, Lena is still considered a main character, fitting inside this collection’s theme of female led fantasy. Having read this series multiple times, I can attest that the combination of civil war history and magic sets it apart from any other fantasy series I’ve read.

   ❖ The second book in this series portrays duality within a single character, Lena. I have found that many fantasy novels portray a realistic combination of right and wrong with many characters battling the tipping of the scale towards one or the other. *Beautiful Darkness* highlights Lena’s own struggle in a more literal sense of this concept, as she is cursed with the powers of both a light and dark caster.

   ❖ Uniquely, this book includes paranormal beings, specifically ghosts and where they reside: a place in between the living and the dead. As the previous book ended with Ethan dying, the authors describe his experience as a spirit, which does not happen in any other novel in this collection.

   ❖ Maas ties together most of the loose ends from the rest of the series in this peaceful finale. Feyre puts her own internal demons to rest, buries her father, and rules a kingdom alongside her husband. Part of what makes many fantasy novels so pleasing to read is their endings. Although there is usually some sort of loss that occurs, we get the sense that peace has been achieved and that the heroine has found her happiness.

   ❖ Several of my collected books feature a single romantic interest, but sometimes I find this to be unrealistic. This book diverges from this concept and focuses on love had and love lost, while also developing the overarching conflict. Feyre experiences
emotional abuse from her partner and eventually leaves him. She finds herself mourning this relationship to uncover her true self.


- A common thread amongst the writings of Sarah J. Maas is that of well-rounded world and character development. The heroine, Feyre begins with a strong hatred toward the faeries as she believes that they have left the humans to starve, but as the story progresses, she sees that there has been a misunderstanding. Additionally, this series is entirely from Feyre’s perspective, so the reader is uncovering aspects of this magical world alongside her.


- This is the first fantasy novel I read that features an all-out war in which characters from all over the region unite and meet on the battle front. Although the actual battle is important, I find that the alliance amongst feuding characters is what makes many fantasy novels like this one unique. This union is made meaningful by Maas’s innate ability to create depth of character relationships.


- I could argue that this is my favorite series in the entire collection. Despite each novel being upwards of 800 pages, it felt like every word Maas wrote was completely necessary. I especially enjoyed how Maas depicts the friendship between Danika and Bryce, even after Danika’s death. This book largely features Bryce’s mourning process and her journey towards some sense of harmony.


- Bryce has discovered a new sense of strength: the power she gained after becoming immortal. Several of my novels include characters that have inherited a power that is unwieldy while trying to solve a pressing conflict. This exhibits a sense of strength and control exhibited by many of my favorite female characters, in which they find a way to understand themselves and their power. The end of this novels ties in the characters from another Maas series, which has never been done before in my collection.

This book reflects an essential piece of Aelin’s character development and those of many other female characters in the fantasy genre. Aelin has held a secret that could alter the course of the rebellion, but she fears the repercussions and responsibility it holds. Moreover, she feels isolated from her friends, but only because she chooses to keep her true self hidden.


In this book, Maas starts to expand her story telling from the perspective of the other supporting characters. Since this plot contains the largest world out of my collection, she needs to keep the reader updated on how the characters are working towards a common goal even if they don’t know it yet. Additionally, we start to see Aelin’s intelligence and bravery to take her rightful place as heir to a lost kingdom.


Previously, Mass insinuated to other magical beings like witches and faeries present in this fictional world, but Aelin had never gotten to see them. In a journey to another continent, she gains a greater understanding of her people’s complexity and the vastness of the realm. Mass’s writing is high fantasy in which the reader is fully immersed into a society completely different than our own. This is part of what makes each novel in my collection a thrilling adventure to read.


*Kingdom of Ash* is an epic finally to an incredibly complex and well written finale to this series. We witness Aelin go through an incredibly damaging experience while her friends rally to free her from her captors. In each fantasy series the heroine endures some sort of adversity, giving the audience a deeper understanding of their resilience. Aelin rises above her trauma and takes back her kingdom, despite everything she’s been through.


In this book, Aelin confronts some characters from her past that formed who she is in the present. However, she is not alone, her friend who have embraced her secrets help her to put these matters to rest and move forward. This is a turning point in many
fantasy plots, representing a transformation of the main character from fragments of a broken person into something whole.

   ❖ *Throne of Glass* is the longest series I own that includes seven books and an additional prequel. Initially, I found this series hard to get invested in, but after reading the first book, I was hooked. Many readers can be daunted by the length of many fantasy series, but I find it to be a reflection of the author’s investment in their writing.

   ❖ As Aelin was captured in the last book, Maas does something I had never read before, we don’t get to see Aelin’s perspective at all. However, we do get to see the development of another character, not only of their own life, but how they help to raise an army for Aelin. Although I was worried about Aelin’s well-being, this was a crucial part of the story, serving as an example of what makes fantasy so thrilling: watching each character develop and react to the world around them.

   ❖ The second book of this series, *Kingdom of the Cursed* changes settings from the mortal world to the Kingdom of the Wicked, more well known as Hell. We see the lore behind this mythical realm and how it parallels and diverges from the Christian interpretation of the afterlife. This is what makes fantasy what it is: a combination of cultural and religious lore used by the authors to give life to myth.

   ❖ Often, the female lead is unrecognizable from the start of the series to the end. The reader sees an evolution of their confidence once a character like Emilia sees their own strength, magically and mentally. However, this confidence happens when Emilia is betrayed by her family and realizes that the one she can rely on is the person she least suspected: Wrath.

   ❖ This is one of the few novels that center its plot around the murder of a protagonist’s family member. Emilia’s twin sister Vittoria is found with her hear ripped out and
Emilia goes against every warning she’s been told to find the murderer. Many times, the heroine goes against logic to avenge or find the truth about someone they love. This is usually what gets them involved with something dangerous and sparks an unexpected conflict, which is how Emilia meets one of the princes of Hell, Wrath.

**Wish List**

   - The third book in the ongoing *Crescent City Series* will be released in January of 2024. The previous book revealed that Maas has included the characters from the *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series into the *Crescent City* universe. I have never read a series that incorporates characters from other worlds created by the author, making this the most highly anticipated book release of my life thus far. The release date is marked on my calendar, and I cannot wait to get my hands on this book.

   - I have heard raving reviews from other fantasy lovers about this book and as it fits into the themes of my collection, I would love to add it to my bookshelf. The kingdom of Kethra is overcome by a deadly plague, signaling the stir of an ancient evil. The back-cover blurb reveals that the protagonist, Casia, has a chosen family; a concept that I apply to my reality and one that I love to see in my books.

   - I am especially curious about this series as it is the first fantasy novel I have encountered with a lesbian protagonist. Although the queer community is represented in several of the novels in my collection, the heroine usually prefers men. This is also a winner of the Lambda Literary Award, so I am excited to see if it lives up to its reputation.

   - Conflict between humans and magical races is a theme represented in my collection, but is not usually the most pressing issue. However, in this series, the main character seems to be caught in the feud between mortals and fae. Additionally, several reviews of this book reveal that the author uses undertones of celtic folklore which is not
present in any of my novels, so I would love to see how it's incorporated into this fantastical world.


- In contrast to many of the high fantasy novels in my collection, this novel seems to take place in a world resembling our own. What makes this novel fit into the fantasy genre is the personification of death, which the heroine recruits to help solve her mother's murder. This personification is seen in the *Kingdom of the Wicked* series, where each sin is represented as a person rather than an abstract emotion. I am eager to see how this novel's combination of mystery and fantasy plays out.

**Images**

*A Court of Thorns and Roses Series*
Crescent City Series

Throne of Glass Series
Shadow and Bone Trilogy

Folk of the Air Trilogy
*The 3rd and 4th books in this series are in my childhood home

*The first book in this series is in my childhood home
Kingdom of The Wicked Trilogy